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Environmental Assessment

Forest-wide Hazardous Tree Removal and Fuels Reduction Project Revision 1

Portions of the White River National Forest within Eagle, Garfield, Pitkin, and Summit
Counties of Colorado

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Mission

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Motto: Caring for the Land and Serving People

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INTRODUCTION

Background

On September 9, 2009 the decision notice for the *Forest-wide Hazardous Tree Removal and Fuels Reduction* was signed. The general goal of the project is to remove hazardous trees from roadways, trails, high-use areas, culturally significant sites, and administrative areas to reduce the possibility of personal or property damage from falling debris resulting from the Mountain Pine Beetle (MPB) epidemic that has been active on the WRNF.

The White River National Forest has begun implementing the selected alternative to meet the goal for providing for public safety in and around administrative sites, developed recreation sites, and along road and trail corridors by reducing risks associated with falling trees and hazardous fuels. Through implementation it was discovered that an amendment to the decision is necessary. This environmental assessment for the amendment focuses on one design criteria.

The July 2009 *Forest-wide Hazardous Tree Removal and Fuels Reduction* is incorporated by reference. The reader is encouraged to obtain a copy to fully understand the project proposal in this environmental assessment.

Purpose and Need for Action

The purpose of this initiative is to update one design criteria in the *Forest-wide Hazardous Tree Removal and Fuels Reduction Project* decision. This action is needed to expedite the removal of trees along roads in a safer manner.

Proposed Action

The action proposed by the Forest Service to meet the purpose and need is to change the design criteria (source *Forest-wide Hazardous Tree Removal and Fuels Reduction Environmental Assessment*, page 9-10) to the following:

2.3.5 Public Safety

- 17) Maintenance level **4 and 5** roads: (*originally Maintenance level 3-5 roads*)
 - a) Shall be maintained for through traffic during felling, slash treatment, and/or removal operations. Traffic delays may occur for a maximum of one half (½) hour.
 - b) Shall be left in an operational condition that will adequately accommodate traffic at the end of each work day.
 - c) Shall have barricades erected and/or proper signs placed at any traffic hazards in or adjacent to the road at the end of each workday. All felled trees and slash shall be removed from the bladed, mowed, or brushed road corridor each day.
 - d) No felling, slash treatment, and/or removal operations shall occur on weekends, holidays, or one day prior to the opening of each of the four big game rifle seasons.
- 18) Maintenance level **2 and 3** roads shall be temporarily closed to general public access during felling, slash treatment, and/or removal operations. Temporary closures may occur from one day to two weeks. (*originally Maintenance level 2 roads*)

There are places along level 3 roads where the number of trees that need to be cut and removed exceed what can be accomplished in a ½ hour. The proposed change is necessary so treatments along maintenance level 3 roads can be accomplished in a more expedient, efficient manner.

Decision Framework

The amendment is being conducted under 36 CFR 218 Pre-decisional Administrative Review Process For Hazardous Fuel Reduction Projects Authorized By The Healthy Forest Restoration Act of 2003; the process used for the Forest-wide Hazardous Tree Removal and Fuels project. As an “authorized project” under HFRA Title I, Sec. 102(a)(1 & 4), the planning process is expedited in order to effect timely vegetation management on certain National Forest System lands that are experiencing disease or insect epidemics or are at imminent risk of such epidemics. There is no requirement to develop and analyze a range of alternatives beyond the No Action and Proposed Action; and, project decisions are not subject to appeal. Rather there is a 30 day objection period after the release of the Environmental Assessment.

Projects authorized under the HFRA are subject to a “Pre-decisional Administrative Review Process” (36 CFR 218) instead of the “Notice, Comment, and Appeal Procedures for National Forest System Projects and Activities” (36 CFR 215) as is typically the case.

For proposed authorized hazardous fuel reduction projects described in an environmental assessment, those who participate during the opportunity for public comment during scoping or other public involvement opportunities are eligible to submit an objection (36 CFR 218.6).

For this project, the responsible official is Forest Supervisor Scott Fitzwilliams. Given the purpose and need, the responsible official reviews the proposed action and the other alternatives in order to decide to accept the proposed change to the original decision.

Public Involvement

On August 23, 2010 the Forest Service mailed a Scoping (40 CFR 1501.7) letter describing the Proposed Action and Purpose and Need for the Project to 149 individuals, organizations, and agencies, including those who commented on the original Environmental Assessment and outfitter guides who may be affected. The scoping period requested letters be submitted by September 3, 2010. Three letters were received. One was in support of expediting the original decision. One who wanted to be sure outfitters and guides are notified of any closures when they occur. One who had concern with access on Red Sandstone Road.

Issues

One issue was raised by the public. A private land owner with an in-holding in the Piney area was concerned about access up Red Sandstone Road/Muddy Pass. A concern was with regard to the potential length of time the road would be closed. A solution was offered to have closures limited to mid-day so at least on a daily basis land owners and commercial users could access the Piney area.

Another concern was to ensure at least one entrance Red Sandstone or Muddy Pass is open to traffic. The Forest Service agrees that scheduling road work to avoid simultaneous closures on Red Sandstone and Muddy Pass should be done so one entrance will always remain open to allow access.

The Forest Service recognized that the recreating public may be impacted for short durations due to road closures. This includes outfitter guide operations that utilize the main routes for access to the forest.

Other suggestions were made that were not part of the purpose and need and proposed action, however are good suggestions for implementation. These include prominent placement of signs posted at the pavement ends of each road being treated, and at other junctions that lead into the road, with dates and a call in number; setting up a telephone hotline with a recorded message providing daily updates of road closures; and if feasible, using flag men, two way radios, and warning signs to provide for public safety.

Alternatives Considered in Detail

Alternative 1 -No Action

Under the No Action alternative, for the *Forest-wide Hazardous Tree Removal and Fuels Reduction Environmental Assessment* (page 9-10), the following design criteria would remain as follows:

2.3.5 Public Safety

19) Maintenance level **3, 4 and 5** roads:

- a) Shall be maintained for through traffic during felling, slash treatment, and/or removal operations. Traffic delays may occur for a maximum of one half (½) hour.
- b) Shall be left in an operational condition that will adequately accommodate traffic at the end of each work day.
- c) Shall have barricades erected and/or proper signs placed at any traffic hazards in or adjacent to the road at the end of each workday. All felled trees and slash shall be removed from the bladed, mowed, or brushed road corridor each day.
- d) No felling, slash treatment, and/or removal operations shall occur on weekends, holidays, or one day prior to the opening of each of the four big game rifle seasons.

20) Maintenance level **2** roads shall be temporarily closed to general public access during felling, slash treatment, and/or removal operations. Temporary closures may occur from one day to two weeks.

Alternative 2

The Proposed Action as Modified

Under the Proposed Action alternative, for the *Forest-wide Hazardous Tree Removal and Fuels Reduction Project*, the design criteria would be re-written as follows:

2.3.5 Public Safety

21) Maintenance level **4 and 5** roads: (*originally Maintenance level 3-5 roads*)

- a) Shall be maintained for through traffic during felling, slash treatment, and/or removal operations. Traffic delays may occur for a maximum of one half (½) hour.

- b) Shall be left in an operational condition that will adequately accommodate traffic at the end of each work day.
 - c) Shall have barricades erected and/or proper signs placed at any traffic hazards in or adjacent to the road at the end of each workday. All felled trees and slash shall be removed from the bladed, mowed, or brushed road corridor each day.
 - d) No felling, slash treatment, and/or removal operations shall occur on weekends, holidays, or one day prior to the opening of each of the four big game rifle seasons.
- 22) Maintenance level **2 and 3** roads shall be temporarily closed to general public access during felling, slash treatment, and/or removal operations. Temporary closures may occur from one day to two weeks. (*originally Maintenance level 2 roads*)

(Modification)

In addition:

Restricting road closures on the Red Sandstone or Muddy Pass roads will be limited to mid-day hours, 10 AM thru 2:30 PM, Monday thru Friday to the extent practicable. In the event of extended road closure delays, accommodation for individuals' access to private or commercial in-holdings will be made.

The modification was added to address the issues raised during public scoping. The original alternative was presented without the modification. This alternative was considered but not analyzed in detail.

Comparison of Alternatives

This section provides a summary of the effects of implementing each alternative. Information in the table is focused on activities and effects where different levels of effects or outputs can be distinguished quantitatively or qualitatively among alternatives.

Table 1. Comparison of Alternatives.

	Alternative 1	Alternative 2
Ability to remove hazard trees along level 3 roads	More time would be required to remove hazard trees along roads thus costing more; potentially causing less miles to be treated; reduces ability to treat roads quickly thus reducing safety hazards (trees falling) on roads.	Would expedite and allow hazard tree removal to be conducted in a more efficient manner thus potentially allowing more miles to be treated quicker at a lower cost and reduce safety concerns from trees falling on the road.
Ability to access the forest	Access would be limited for 30 minutes at a time along a level 3 road however these disruptions would be over a longer period of time as it would take longer to remove the hazard trees along the road.	Access may be disrupted to an area of the forest for short durations. In some cases there are alternative routes to an area and/or alternative areas on the forest to participate in a particular recreation activity. Outfitter-guides may have to adjust locations, access, or timing of their permitted activity.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

This section summarizes the physical, biological, social and economic environments of the affected project area and the potential changes to those environments due to implementation of the alternatives. It also presents the scientific and analytical basis for comparison of alternatives presented in the chart above.

Public safety along roads, road access

Affected Environment

Maintenance level 3 roads serve as the main routes on to the White River National Forest. This network of arterial and collector roads serve the remaining network of level 2 roads. These roads serve to access to many recreation activities across the forest.

Currently there is an effort in place to remove hazardous trees along forest roads where trees pose a threat to falling on the road. Due to a recent bark beetle epidemic there are more dead and dying trees than normal raising the need to treat along roads in a more aggressive, comprehensive manner.

Environmental Consequences

Direct and Indirect Effects of Alternative 1

Under the no action alternative the design criteria that limit closing maintenance level 3 roads to 30 minutes would remain in place. Safety would remain a concern until the hazardous trees along these roads were treated. Access would be disrupted at 30 minute intervals, thus providing access during the day. The disruption along a particular road however will be for a longer period of time as it will take longer to treat each road.

Outfitters may not have to adjust their operations as much under this alternative, though coordination with the Forest Service is still needed.

Costs for treatment would be higher in this alternative then the proposed action due to the fact the operator can only operate at 30 minute intervals and prepare the road for safe passage in between these intervals. More time would be required for treatment under this alternative as well.

Direct and Indirect Effects of Alternative 2

Under the proposed action the design criteria would be rewritten to allow closures of maintenance level 3 roads for longer periods of time while roads-sides are treated for hazard tree removal. Access could be disrupted for days rather than during one day. Treatments however would be done in a more efficient manner than under the no action alternative thus reducing the amount of time and cost per road.

The public may not be able to recreate in a particular location on the forest during the time a road is being treated. They will have to seek other locations for their activity on those days. These are not long term closures however and though inconvenient are not significant in effect, nor not allowing one to recreate on the forest.

Administrative, special use permit, land owner access would also be disrupted during treatment. These users will have to seek alternatives to access certain areas of the forest. To minimize this effect the Forest Service will need to notify publics and special permit users when closures are to occur.

Cumulative effects

Other closures may occur due to road maintenance and timber haul activities. These could increase the amount of time or number of times a road is closed.

Consultation and Coordination

The Forest Service consulted the following individuals, Federal, State, and local agencies, tribes and non-Forest Service persons during the development of this environmental assessment:

ID TEAM MEMBERS:

Jan Burke – Forest Silviculturalist, Forest Health Staff Officer

Wendy Jo Haskins – Planning and Resources Staff Officer, Forest and Transportation Planning

FEDERAL, STATE, AND LOCAL AGENCIES:

Town of Avon, Town of Basalt, Town of Minturn, Town of Redcliff, Town of Snowmass Village, and Town of Vail

Eagle Board of County Commissioners, Pitkin Board of County Commissioners, and Summit Board of County Commissioners

TRIBES:

Southern Ute Indian Tribe

Ute Mountain Indian Tribe

Ute Tribe of the Uintah & Ouray Reservation

OTHERS:

Outfitters & Guides, interested parties, local groups and individuals